

Advice for Saddam

President Saddam Hussein, down but not out, has been getting plenty of good advice from a source that probably causes him as much irritation as embarrassment, Tehran. In his statement issued on Friday, the Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has called upon the Iraqi President to step down and to give his opposition a chance to rebuild the ruined country.

The advice from Mr Rafsanjani comes in the wake of growing rebellion against the Saddam regime almost throughout southern Iraq, in which even a conservative estimate puts the number of dead at 30,000. True, in some areas, troops loyal to the government have managed to bring the situation under relative control. But this marginal improvement does not offer the Iraqi leader the prospect of a long-term solution of his internal problem.

The crisis facing Iraq — or rather President Saddam Hussein — is a pretty straightforward one. The country needs enormous assistance for its reconstruction, like Germany and Japan did after the Second World War. The people of Iraq have as much right to lead a normal life, in peace and relative prosperity, as, say, the people of Kuwait, just liberated from the occupation of Iraq. In short, the people of Iraq should not be made to pay for the blunders and crimes committed by President Saddam and his so-called revolutionary clique.

The western powers, especially the United States may be perfectly serious in pledging their financial support for the rebuilding of war-ravaged Iraq. The question is, can they carry out such a pledge, while Saddam Hussein remains in power, trying to crush an internal revolt or, as some western sources say, regrouping his forces on a long-range plan? So, Iraq in turmoil, with its government still in the hands of Saddam Hussein, hardly qualifies for any external assistance for reconstruction. It is also hardly the country that would be forthcoming in paying for the damages other countries, including Bangladesh, have suffered due to the misadventure of President Saddam.

Iraq is one country which probably knows better than most others what has been going on inside Iraq. During the Gulf war, it stuck to a carefully-planned position, maintained its credibility with the international community and kept up an open dialogue with Baghdad, despite its opposition to Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. Now, with the war over and the Iraqi leadership in dire need for some friendly advice, Tehran can take credit for the way its diplomacy has paid off.

There is, however, room for speculation, if not misgivings, about Iran's long-term interest in the future of Iraq. Tehran would be justified in wanting to see an Iraq that is friendly to Iran. But the region, especially Saudi Arabia, would be rightly concerned about any Iranian hegemonism, built on the export of its own brand of Islamic fundamentalism. The Muslim world, indeed the international community as a whole, would welcome the involvement of Iran in the mainstream of development in the region, with Tehran playing a positive constructive role on the side of peace, progress and regional solidarity.

Equal Rights for Women

The country observed International Women's Day '91 on Friday. The committee observing the day in Bangladesh issued a four-point charter, demanding equality of rights under personal law, amendment of the Constitution to ensure equality in public and family life, establishment of rights of women workers by law, and last but not least, ratification by the government of the UN Charter established by the Nairobi Conference on Women's Rights.

A glance at the demands is enough to make us realise the second-class status women still have to endure in the eyes of the law in this country. But this is not simply a case of male legislators passing laws to suit their interests. The state's apparent indifference to women's rights is a reflection of long-held social prejudices against women's status in the family as well as in public affairs. The product of a primitive mind, these prejudices are reinforced and legitimised by social and religious customs and taboos. The problem thus becomes one of attitude.

To combat discriminatory practices bred by prejudice, we need strong legislation by parliament. With the coming of a freer, more democratic atmosphere in the country, we can expect women's right to equality to get a more serious hearing. Ratification of the Nairobi Declaration would be a good start, followed by acts of parliament outlawing discrimination at the work place, as well as giving women equality with men in personal and family matters. The fact that we now have two ladies leading the largest and second-largest parties in parliament may cause optimism. But we should be cautious: only four out of 294 members directly elected on Feb 27 are women.

Women still suffer a high level of oppression. In India, the practice of suttee or bride-burning, though banned by law, still exists; in Bangladesh, the dowry system still flourishes. Economic exploitation of women has become even more pronounced since new industries, particularly ready-made garments, opened up new opportunities. Garments is the largest-single foreign exchange-earning industry in Bangladesh, and it is dominated by women. Yet wage level there is some of the lowest in industry, with little benefits and unsafe working conditions. Within the family, women are very much the subordinate, with the added disadvantage of men having the "right" to practice polygamy.

Electing a woman to become prime minister or president will not have much meaning if we continue to deny half the country's population equal rights and status in every field. The government as well as the private sector should now begin to approach every project, every venture with particular attention to involvement of women, on an equal footing with men.

JUST over six years ago, the Philippines' most distinguished publisher, the late Chino Roces of the Manila Times collected a million signatures to persuade Corazon Aquino to run in the presidential election against the late Ferdinand Marcos. The reluctant housewife obliged, won the race and the stage was set for a long honeymoon between the Aquino administration and the media.

Last month, President Aquino took the witness stand in a packed Manila court room in a sensational libel suit she had filed against a popular newspaper columnist, Luis Beltran, who had written that the Philippine leader had hid under her bed during a coup attempt in 1987.

In suing Beltran, once a close ally of the President, Ms Aquino has asked for damages amounting to the equivalent of US \$140,000 or close to half a crore Taka.

However, the case involves a great deal more than just money. It underscores an attempt by President Aquino to tame what many observers regard as an unbridled Manila media and, in the process, to define the relationship between the administration and the press.

The Philippines is the last one of the six-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to get engaged in a battle between the government and the press. The record in other countries of the grouping is, at best, mixed; at worst, dismal.

In many ways, the situation in Malaysia and Singapore is similar. The two countries operate almost identical press laws, like annual renewal of publication licenses, and security acts. In both the countries, some opposition newspapers have been either temporarily or permanently shut down and foreign publications are carefully scrutinised or, as in Singapore, the circulation of the offending ones are drastically cut. In both Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the so-called national dailies are mouthpieces of the administration, paying meagre attention to opposition parties.

Compared to Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia can boast of a diverse press, especially in the national language, and a powerful community media. But by the Philippine standards or, for that matter, by those in some South Asian countries, it is

docile, mindful of the sensitivities of the administration, especially on the issue of corruption which triggered off a major crisis between the Australian media and the administration of President Suharto late in the eighties. While keeping a low profile, the Jakarta press does often enact what Indonesians call a "shadow play", through super-imposition of images conveying subtle or hidden meanings.

It is a different situation altogether in Thailand which, over the decades, has known one military coup after another, each one putting the press under tight censorship. Just now, the "Land of the Free", as the country is called, has been

Singapore and Jakarta remain almost pathologically suspicious of any form of political dissent which, as a matter of right, seeks media exposure.

From time to time, the two most articulate ASEAN leaders, Dr Mahathir Muhammad and Lee Kuan Yew have made the case that the media in Asia, especially in their two countries, cannot be guided by what they call the western concept of press freedom. "The press can certainly play a watchdog role", the Malaysian Prime Minister once said, "but it cannot take up an adversary position in relation to the administration."

the authorities have lifted the ban on the use of satellite dishes for direct TV news from round the world.

In another development, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) has been negotiating with the Atlanta-based CNN for a 24-hour link up.

If the city state opens up in the field of electronic media, say experts, the authorities cannot remain too rigid in dealing with the press, local and foreign.

What happens in Singapore will, sooner or later, affect Malaysia. After all, the two countries can watch each other's television, a boon for all TV viewers.

If developments in Singapore and Malaysia take a positive turn, there may be new opportunities for dialogue between journalists' unions in the two countries and the two administrations, perhaps through the involvement of the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists Unions, an active but not a particularly militant body.

In more ways than one, what happens in Manila, especially in the damage suit filed by President Aquino against Luis Beltran, will have a bearing on the whole ASEAN situation.

With some regional journals taking a critical line against the free wheeling, highly sensational and gossipy Manila press — one headline asks, "Watchdogs or Vultures?" — President Aquino is hardly on the defensive. With too much being revealed about how powerful columnists get manipulated by shady business houses, even the Catholic Church is asking for a new approach to the role of the media in the Philippines. In effect, the Church has set the stage for a counter-attack. It plans to set up a television network and 13 radio stations in a move to present an alternative to what it calls an overdose of sex and violence in the Philippine media.

With only a year to go for the next presidential election, Cory Aquino — as the press still calls her, certainly less fondly than before — has taken up one of the toughest battles of her political life. If she wins, she may well decide to enter the race next year, contrary to her earlier disclaimers. It is hard to think that the 58-year old Philippine leader is doing all this for her unknown successor at the Malacanang Palace.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. Ali

going through one such phases.

However, most people believe that when the latest coup has run its course and the country has a new parliament, the free-wheeling Bangkok media, such as the mass circulation Thai newspapers and a dozen Radio and TV stations, will pick up the pieces again, as if, coup or no coup, it is still business as usual.

An independent media hardly exists in Brunei, the tiny ASEAN member. But it boasts of a technically superb television network that specialises in foreign coverage, a compensation for news hungry small expatriate community in the oil-rich sultanate.

This broad overview obscures several complex issues. But there is also one basic question that calls for an answer: What went wrong in the relationship between the government and the press in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia?

Many journalists and international press bodies blame administrations in the three countries for being too sensitive of press criticisms and for refusing to accept the watchdog role of the media. Critics also say that if the press remains under tight control in all the three countries, it is partly because governments in Kuala Lumpur,

In cutting the circulation of a number of foreign publications in Singapore, Mr Lee said again and again, "It is a privilege for a foreign publication to sell in Singapore, not a matter of right." And then he warned that this "privilege" can be reduced or withdrawn if the publication concerned publishes materials on the republic's domestic issues, which amounts to interference in the city state's internal politics.

Surprisingly enough, the Singapore leader has got away with this line of reasoning. A couple of months ago, he even got standing ovation at the Hongkong's Foreign Correspondents' Club where he had delivered a luncheon talk defending his attitude towards foreign publications.

Most independent experts would regard the overall situation as unsatisfactory and detrimental to the concept of press freedom. But do we see any signs of changes on the horizon?

In fact, there are some mixed signals coming from Singapore. The new Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong — Mr Lee remains a senior cabinet minister and holds the all-powerful position as party secretary — has, for the first time, appointed a Minister for Information to study scopes for liberalisation of press laws. Meanwhile,

Changes Hold out Hopes for Fair Guyana Poll

by Edwin Ali

Guyana, the former British colony on mainland South America, has been plagued ever since independence in 1966 by a series of dubious elections. Another election is now due and this time President Desmond Hoyte is changing electoral procedures. He may retain power, but, a fair election could take the country a long way towards securing a return of the foreign investment the country so desperately needs.

Elections to be held soon in Guyana could transform the political situation there for the first time since independence in 1966. The change will flow from two momentous decisions on electoral procedure taken by the government of President Desmond Hoyte.

These provide for a preliminary count at individual polling places before a final count at a central location and for a complete revision of the voters list. The effect will be to remove a system which has allowed the People's National Congress (PNC) to perpetuate itself in office.

The PNC came to power in 1964 and after elections since then evidence has been irrefutable that it repeatedly padded the voters list and engaged in other devices to stay in charge.

For this year's elections a team of Commonwealth observers will be in Guyana as well as observers from the United States. If the polls are conducted fairly there could be a resurgence of confidence in this potentially rich country and a return of foreign investment.

Anxieties about Guyana's political future go back long before independence. Different from other British colonies leading to independence, the voting system introduced in Guyana was a form of proportional representation.

On the day of the 1964 election the British Governor, Sir Richard Luyt, sent shock waves through the country when he pointed out that even if the then ruling People's Pro-

gressive Party (PPP) secured a majority of the votes cast he was not compelled to call on its leader, Cheddi Jagan, to form a new government.

The comment resulted in thousands of PPP supporters

either spilling their ballots or staying at home. The result was a coalition between the PNC, headed by Forbes Burnham, and the right wing United Force led by businessman Peter D'Aguiar.

In general elections in 1968, 1973, 1980 and 1985 there was evidence of, among other devices, the casting of votes by dead individuals. In addition, a list of 68,588 Guyanese living abroad was

compiled by PNC officials. It was claimed most voted for the PNC.

Over the years calls were made for an end to deceit, for new voters lists to be compiled and for army seizures of ballot boxes to cease. The pleas always fell on deaf ears.

President Burnham continued in office from 1968 until his death in 1985. Hoyte, who had been first Vice-President and Prime Minister, took over a country with runaway inflation and corruption that had led to economic chaos.

The decisions now made to change the voting system followed pressures from Commonwealth and many other quarters. The final credit goes to former US President Jimmy Carter, who visited Guyana last year and held intensive meetings with Hoyte, government officials and opposition, civic and business leaders.

Hoyte had been totally against a preliminary count at the polling booths, claiming that it would provoke violence. He changed his mind, but pointed out that revision of the voters list would delay the elections past the constitutional deadline of March.

Carter tentatively committed the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government,

which he formed and chairs, to serve as observers. Recently he has led observer teams for elections in Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

The Guyana election could result in the re-election of Hoyte as President in a contest with the PPP, which is still led by the 71-year-old Jagan, who first became Premier in 1961. After losing office when the Governor formed the coalition in 1964 he boycotted the conference that led to independence held in London in 1965. Burnham ruled for another 20 years.

When Hoyte became president he distanced himself from Burnham's rhetoric and socialist dogma, which had resulted in more than 80 per cent of industry coming under state control. He skillfully re-established contact with leaders of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) and other world leaders and sought to attract foreign investors and entrepreneurial skills. He was praised for removing restrictions on flour, one of Burnham's fundamental blunders that earned him the wrath of many Guyanese.

All these efforts were still overshadowed by party infighting and corruption at the highest level of government. Changes in the electoral system could now win him renewed respect. Much depends on the machinery for the voters list revision and whether those responsible will be handpicked PNC supporters of come from all the political parties. That will be for the observer teams to judge. — GEMINI

Guyana (Amerindian for land of waters)

100 miles / 160 km

Atlantic Ocean

Venezuela

GEORGETOWN

Bartica

New Amsterdam

Suriname

Karanambo

Karaidanawa

Brazil

2401 M

The people: Half 50,000 population descended from Indian workers. One-third are Africans. Rest native Amerindian, Chinese or Portuguese.

1814 Formally ceded to Britain

1831 Colony of British Guiana formed

1953 Under new constitution, ministerial system and universal suffrage introduced. Jagan's PPP wins general election. British suspend constitution.

1953-61 British rule through Legislative Council

1961 After election under fresh constitution Jagan forms government

1962-4 Independence talks fail amid civil unrest

1964 Burnham takes over after election

1965 Independence decided at London talks boycotted by Jagan

1966 May 26 Independence

1980 Prime Minister Burnham becomes President under new constitution

1985 Burnham dies. Hoyte succeeds

Cheddi Jagan Premier 1961-4

Forbes Burnham PM, then President 1964-85

Desmond Hoyte President 1985

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Verdict of the vote

Sir, The verdict of the vote is silent and mighty. It hits when it is too late to recover and change the course of events.

Therefore, there is more to unlearn from mistakes than to learn.

The more fancied political party failed to capture power during the recent parliamentary election. Its philosophy apparently did not sell.

There are two ways of looking at this debacle: the voters could not appreciate what they would be missing; or the party strategists and planners worked with faulty feedback system to get the right pulse of the nation.

The voters who voted in favour of the winning party cannot be dismissed summarily of not being able to make up their minds.

What went wrong? (a) the party's "isms" was No 1 priority; (b) the country (or the people) was No 2 priority; (c) the accent was on the past — for the future. How far this philosophy had been successful in history? Should we look up to the future, or look back more into the past? The past is past, and cannot be undone. As past events become facts, only its interpretations can be manipulated as opinions or views. Opinions may, and do, vary; — and (d) trying for success or greatness by abus-

ing men or events cannot be achieved through proxy. Such props have weak foundation. Public memory is short, and the generation gap is very much there.

To err is human. The potentiality of erring again is guaranteed to the human mind. So, judge not, that ye be judged.

We are good voters — thanks to the interim government. We wait for the new government in suspense — and supplication. The people have to be treated above politics; simply because life is more than mere politics.

A. Mawaz
Dhaka

BARI in disarray

Sir, The recent unrest of general scientists and others at the nation's largest agricultural research institute — BARI — is the culmination of prolonged arbitrary decisions made by the erstwhile authority of the Agriculture

Ministry. Now the desperate efforts to continue past practices has led to unprecedented tensions, posturing and processions almost every day and also hartals on its campus. The despotic actions are vehemently opposed by the rank and file of the employees of the institute. Government is urged to save this Institute from total ruination and free it from the caprices of a few people.

Concerned scientists

Writings on the wall

Sir, Now that the elections are over and the results out, we request the concerned authorities to take measures to rub off the writings from the walls in different parts of the city.

These writings as expressions for election or party canvassing have served their purpose as long as the election was to take place.

But now it does not have any meaning at all. Rather it spoils the aesthetic beauty of the city.

I am sure, many citizens will agree with me, that while we do need campaigning during election time, it is not perhaps the best idea to spoil the neatly painted walls. There can be other and more effective methods of electioneering.

Rima Qader
Bakshi Bazar, Dhaka

Islam and Gulf war

Sir, Many years ago when the world was dark and barbaric for human being, learning was beyond imagination. Gradually men became erudite and discovered good and bad conceptions which had been mastered by human races over the centuries. Now we are progressive in religion, and other fields of wisdom; so to say we are civilized and conscious. But weeks ago the Gulf war had been there befooling the wisdom, all to the distress of human race. Scrutinising

fairly the events that led to it I am but to accuse Saddam for such a devastating war. Saddam, considered as a leader and hero of Islamic world, why didn't play wise, I wonder.

Does Saddam possess admirable qualities? It is very regretful to question. But a conscious man can never second oppression or aggression and that also adopting Islamic shield at times as crusader who was combating to rescue Islam. Perpetrating such actions as invasion of Kuwait and not abiding by the majority demand to quit leading to the Arab-on-Arab devastating war Saddam has spoiled Islamic values and norms too. Islam is a sublime religion in the world and the whole world recognises the Middle East as a Muslim place.

In the Gulf war we can well surmise that the world has lost a lot and for which Saddam is more liable than others involved.

Jakir Hossain
Tejgaon, Dhaka